

An Unexpected Gift

By Nayt Snyder

The specter of Death loomed over the snow-covered house, looking down at the warm light emanating from inside. Shivering, he watched the family go about opening presents, their happy faces a broad contrast to the dreary weather of the dwindling twilight. Death touched down on the ground and began walking up the snowy pathway to the front door, still watching the cheery family.

He paused, looking through the big picture window to see the old man giving his grandson a small present wrapped in red reindeer decorated paper and topped with a large green bow. The boy opened it carefully and pulled a red and green woolen hat from the box, beaming at the tassels on either side, and the large, red pom-pom on top. Death's teeth chattered when he smiled at the scene, and he hurried to the door, wanting to get out of the chilly weather.

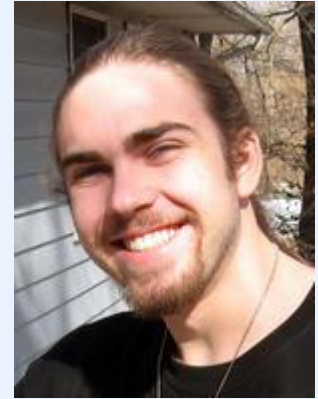
Death walked through the front door and brushed off his nice black suit, complete with a Santa tie for the holiday. Wiping the snow from his slicked-back hair and stomping the last of it from his shiny black shoes (complete with Rudolph socks), he walked into the living room, rubbing his hands to shake off the cold. Entering the room where the family had congregated around the large, lavishly decorated Christmas tree, he felt the heat from the fireplace -- and a twinge of sadness in his frostbitten cheeks.

To Death, this was the worst part of finding his next customer. When he walked into the room, no one noticed him, or even had the faintest idea that he was even present. The father with his Santa hat was passing out the presents, the mother was telling the grandmother some little anecdote, the young aunt and her fiancé, holding hands on the sofa, were waiting for their next gift, and the grandfather was ruffling the oversized wool cap on the little boy's head as the small child giggled.

None of them noticed.

Death still had time before he would make a new acquaintance, and so he found an empty chair where he could sit and watch the family and still be out of the way. As he sat down, he saw a dog at the grandfather's feet, which eyed him for a moment, but then went back to its master's petting hand. Animals, being the only living things aware enough to know he was about, were always pleasant to have around. But then again, Death had never cared much for dogs.

The father pulled another small blue present out from under the tree, and handed it to the mother, who blushed and took it. Death felt something on his leg, which distracted him from the mother's



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delicate tearing of the wrapping paper and he looked down to find an orange tabby nuzzling his forearm. Death smiled again, as the tabby jumped into his lap and curled up, purring. He chuckled and stroked its fur. He had always liked cats.

Death wasn't cold anymore, and he watched as the mother kissed her husband on the cheek, thanking him for the silver necklace she had just gotten. Death watched the scene play out before him. He leaned back in the chair and thought of all the other times he had been in this situation, watching those memories play out on the backs of his eyelids.

A cheer from the family brought him back to the present and he saw the father unwrap a new book. Death could feel the merriment in the air, and he let the feeling sink in.

There were only a few more presents under the tree now, and the little boy had just opened his last. The father pulled out a gift for the grandmother, and the little boy looked over to Death's chair. The boy smiled, and Death thought the child was smiling at the cat. But when the cat jumped down from his lap and the boy waved, Death realized the boy was looking at him! Death was shocked. All he could do was smile and wave back. That brought a big cheesy smile from the little boy, who then turned back to see his grandmother holding a new shawl.

Something like that had never happened to Death before and he didn't know how it could be true. He looked behind and around himself to make sure, but he was the only one in the direction the boy had waved. Death honestly didn't know what to make of the situation.

The father pulled the last present out from under the tree, and handed it to his sister-in-law and soon to be brother-in-law. The little boy broke off from the group and walked over to Death, oversized cap still on his smiling head.



"How come you didn't get any Cwissmass pwesents, Mista?" the little boy asked. Death didn't know how to respond -- he simply didn't know how -- but eventually managed to say, "Because I'm not part of your family." The boy giggled. Death glanced at the family, who were all too engrossed in the aunt's gift to notice the boy talking to a chair.

"You's silly. Eveyone gets pwesents on Cwissmass!"

"Not me." Death replied, chuckling. The boy looked disconcerted at that, then a smile brightened his face again and he took off his hat.

"You take this then, Mista. It'll keep you wawm outside."

And the boy held out his oversized cap to Death, who merely smiled and took it. The boy started to turn around, but Death stopped him. "Your grandfather is going to go upstairs in a few minutes. He forgot one of the presents up there. You should help him with it, otherwise he may fall and hurt himself."

The boy smiled at him again. "OK, thanks Mista. Mewwy Cwissmass!"

"Merry Christmas, kid," Death said, tousling the child's hair.

The boy turned and ran to his grandfather, who was saying something about a present in the room upstairs. A smile crept across Death's face as he stood up. He didn't have anymore business here.

Death made his way toward the front door, dreading the cold. His dismay showed on his face as he walked outside, and the chilly weather bit against his flesh.

Then he remembered the wool cap he was holding. He put it on, and tied the tassels under his chin. It fit him perfectly, even covering his ears from the icy wind. Death stepped off the front stoop and began his trudge through the snow, back to the street.

He took one last look back at the house, seeing the grandfather and small boy come into the living room with the last present, each face in the home lighting up with Christmas cheer.

Death simply smiled, put his hands in his pockets, and walked off into the night.

Death leaned against the wall in the funeral home, next to the white-haired old man. It had been 13 years since he had last visited this family. The white snow was thick on the ground, the wind cool on the cheek and the people were all dressed in black.

It was common courtesy to let the passing souls stay on the plane of the living through their funeral -- it gave them one last chance to say goodbye to all of their loved ones -- so Death had stayed with the old man, letting him get used to the idea of being dead, and helping him with his regrets, waiting for the funeral to come and go. The old man had taken his passing fairly well, didn't have many regrets, and so he and Death had gotten to have a few minor conversations before the funeral took place.

The funeral was beautiful. Lilies lined the walls, people laughed and cried together and the old man's casket was gorgeous. It was an open-casket service, and when looking at the face on the body that no longer drew breath, Death got a sense of universal calm.

The line of mourners had begun a while ago, and the pile of flowers in front of the casket had grown tremendous. As the line diminished down to the immediate family, Death recognized a few of the faces. First the mother, gently weeping; the father, tears glazing his eyes; the aunt and her husband, with their new baby girl; the grandmother, a content and happy smile on her face as she passed her dead lover and dropped her flower; and the small boy, who was not so small now, and whose eyes leaked at their seams. Death would have felt sorry for the child, if he hadn't seen the bright smile stretched across his face.

Death looked at the grandfather and saw he was similarly crying.

Then, a movement caught Death's eye. He looked back to the boy, who pulled out a pair of Christmas tree embroidered mittens attached to a piece of paper from his pocket. Death watched the boy drop it behind the tower of flowers, and saw the writing on the note:

To the man whom I gave my tasseled hat:

Thank you for the extra time with my Grandfather. Please take him home safely.

Death picked up the mittens, held them aloft for the grandfather to see and held the note out for him to read.

"I wondered where he put that old hat," said the grandfather.

Death offered him the mittens.

"No, no, I think they're for you." The old man remarked, smiling.

Death put the mittens on. "I believe it's time for us to go then." The old man nodded his consent and the two walked to the door.

Before walking outside, Death paused a moment. He reached into his pocket and pulled out an old hat which had lost most of its color through the years, but kept his head warm in the cold weather none-the-less.

Death put on the tasseled wool cap, noting how it matched his new mittens. He looked to the old man next to him, who was grinning, and they walked out the door together.

This time, Death didn't have to put his hands in his pockets.